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## **The discovery of the Long-tailed Wren Babbler *Spelaornis chocolatinus* in Thailand**

*by Philip D. Round & Anak Pattanavibool*

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We report the discovery of a population of the Long-tailed Wren Babbler *Spelaornis chocolatinus* on the 2,160 m peak of Doi Kajela (16° 10'N, 99° 02'E), in Umphang Wildlife Sanctuary, Tak Province, Western Thailand, during a preliminary appraisal of wildlife and forests on this biologically unexplored mountain, 21–26 April 2001. The site had been identified, under the name Khao Kha Khaeng, as being of likely ornithological importance in Round (1988), and invited survey.

The authors were accompanied by Mr. Martin van de Bult, Field Botanist, Western Forest Complex Ecosystem Management Project (WEFCOM), two staff of the WEFCOM Project, Mr. Nont Khieowan and Mr. Kwanchai Waiphanyakam, Mr. Siriya Sriphanomyom, an undergraduate student from University of Khon Kaen, and two wildlife sanctuary workers, Mr. Tom Sertnio and Mr. Duangchan Bajai.

The party left the Mae Klong Khii Guard Station of Umphang Wildlife Sanctuary, at Km 120 on the road between the district towns of Mae Sot and Umphang, on the morning of 21 April, reaching the upper elevations of Doi Kajela at midday on 24 April, a straight-line distance of only *c.* 9 km to the south-east. Progress was slow because of the absence of any known trail and because dense bamboo, resulting from old fire damage, had grown up along ridges at around 1,500–1,800 m, impeding progress. Camp was established on a ridge below the summit of Doi Kajela, in little-disturbed, broadleaved evergreen forest, close to a small stream gully, at 2,100 m, on the afternoon on 24 April. That evening, at around 1800 h, after the group returned to camp following an excursion to the summit area, PDR descended into

the damp stream gully to search for skulking understorey birds. The two sanctuary workers also came down and commenced to cut rattan shoots to supplement the evening meal. Possibly in response the noise of this hacking of vegetation, an unfamiliar bird started calling. While awaiting the bird's emergence, its vocalizations were tape-recorded using a Sennheiser ME-88 microphone in combination with a home-made pre-amplifier, and a Sony Walkman Professional WM-D6C analogue cassette tape machine.

At this point no playback was used and the observer waited quietly until the bird came into view, at the edge of the dense ground storey vegetation along the edge of the small streamlet. It was approximately the shape of a *Stachyris* babbler, with a moderate length tail, rufous-orange underparts and grey on the sides of the head and across the forecrown. PDR immediately realised that this was a species not hitherto recorded from Thailand. Playback of the bird's tape-recorded trilling call resulted in calling by a pair of birds, in which the birds duetted, one individual (presumably the male) giving the trill and the other, the presumed female, giving a rasping note. Subsequent views of the second individual (the bird which was making the trilling vocalization, and which was seen head-on) revealed grey sides to the head, a pencil thin blackish moustache along the lower margin of the ear coverts and a prominent white throat. The colour of the underparts was not specifically noted and the light was beginning to fade, but unlike the first bird these did not appear to be strongly rufous-orange.

PDR informed AP that evening of his discovery, and on the following morning PDR, AP and SS descended to the gully in search of the babbler, all observers obtaining further brief views of one individual. Following this, PDR visited another gully in the vicinity of the camp, and discovered a second pair, obtaining close views of one individual, presumed to be a female because it was giving the rasping call, and hearing the trilling call of the male in the vicinity. One other bird, representing a third pair or territory, was heard below the summit, c. 500 m distant.

PDR tentatively identified the bird as possibly belonging to the genus *Spelaeornis* on the basis of the scaled upperparts, but was puzzled by the absence of barring or spotting on the wing coverts. An unfamiliar *Pellorneum* was also considered, in view of the species' slight resemblance to *P. albiventre*. None of the party was carrying Robson (2000) or any other work on extralimital birds, so formal identification had to await return to Bangkok. After consulting Robson (2000) PDR and SS separately and independently concluded that the birds were Long-tailed Wren Babblers, of the race *reptatus*. The call of this form was described by Robson as a repeated, decelerating trill, *pwrrriii 'i' 'i' 'i'* which tallied closely with the Doi Kajela birds. The only feature which did not tally with the depiction and account in Robson was that none of the party had observed any barring or mottling on the underparts. PDR sent a copy of his tape to Craig Robson without informing him of his diagnosis. CR had no hesitation in identifying the bird as *Spelaeornis chocolatinus reptatus* after comparing the tape with another recording of this taxon from Yunnan (C. Robson *in litt.* to PDR).

## Description

A small babbler with warm rufous-olive upperparts, lacking any tipping on wing coverts or tertials, though with soft mottling or scaling on hindcrown and hindneck formed by contrast between centres and margins of individual feathers. It was not seen if the mottling extended on to the mantle. Grey sides to the head extended in a brow above the eye and also met across the forecrown (the brown of the crown extended forward along the midline but did not appear to extend to the base of the bill). Two birds identified as females on the basis of their rasping (rather than trilling) calls showed breast, flanks and belly all warm orange-rufous, with a whitish patch extending forward between the legs. The under tail coverts were not white but appeared either dull rufous or fulvous in colour. The colour of the throat was not specifically noted, though the birds lacked any moustache. The bill was blackish-grey and the legs brownish-flesh. The iris was dark, either dark brown or reddish. The male bird differed in seemingly being duller on the underparts (though the colour was not specifically noted); in having a pencil-thin black moustache along the lower margin of the ear coverts and a prominent white throat.

The general proportions and actions recalled Spot-throated Babbler *Pellorneum albiventre*, or perhaps a small *Stachyris* babbler. The birds kept to within < 1 m from the ground, in dense herbage though on a few occasions birds perched out on a fallen log or stumps.

The male call was a loud, 1.5 second long bubbling trill, *prrrpi-pi-pi-pi-pi-pi*. The female call was a rasping *pitcherrr-pitcherrr* (Fig. 1). One of the female birds gave soft *pt . . . pt . . .* calls when moving through the foliage, feeding. The trilling call was very distinctive and bore no resemblance to any vocalization of the *Pellorneum* and *Stachyris* species known to the authors.

Renewed impetus to explore Doi Kajela came following the November 2000 discovery of Rusty-capped Fulvetta *Alcippe dubia*, also previously unrecorded in Thailand, on the nearby 1,960 m mountain of Doi Mokoju (15° 56'N, 99° 06'E), on the border between Mae Wong National Park and Umphang Wildlife Sanctuary (Wachara Sanguansombat, *in litt.* to P.D. Round, December 2000). Like Doi Mokoju, Doi Kajela supported a population of *A. dubia* and other higher montane species restricted to a small number of peaks in Thailand, such as Yellow-bellied Fantail *Rhipidura hypoxantha*, White-browed Shortwing *Brachypteryx montana*, Chestnut-tailed Minla *Minla strigula* and Green-tailed Sunbird *Aethopyga nipalensis*. It is possible that the Long-tailed Wren Babbler will be found also on Doi Mokoju with improved coverage of that mountain, perhaps having been overlooked up to the present.

Four presently recognised subspecies of *Spelaeoris chocolatinus* occur in NE India and SW China, in western, northern and eastern Myanmar and W Tonkin, at elevations of 1,200 m to 2,800 m (Ali & Ripley 1983, Cheng 1987, Robson 2000). *S.c. reptatus* occurs in NE India (Rasmussen & Anderton, *in press*), in NE and E Myanmar to SW China, north possibly as far as Sichuan (Cheng, 1987; Fig. 2).

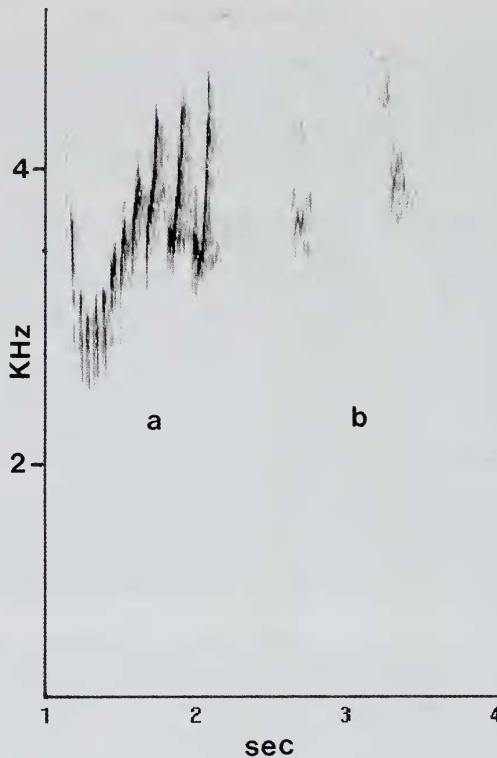


Figure 1. Sonogram of vocalizations of Long-tailed Wren Babbler *Spelaornis chocolatinus*, Umphang Wildlife Sanctuary, Tak Province, western Thailand, April 2001. The first element (a) is a rising, bubbling trill, given by the male, followed by a rasping call (b) given by the female.

Robson (2000) documented considerable differences in song among some of these subspecies, implying that *S. chocolatinus* as presently constituted may be a complex of more than one species, and indeed *reptatus* is treated as a full species by Rasmussen & Anderton (in press). The occurrence of *S. c. reptatus* on Doi Kajela was highly significant and unexpected, since this site lies over 500 km to the south of the hitherto southernmost records, in Kengtung, E. Myanmar (Bingham 1903, Stanford & Mayr 1941). The absence of records from the avifaunistically similar mountains of Doi Inthanon (2,565 m) and Doi Pha Hom Pok (2,285 m), which lie between Doi Kajela and Kengtung, at 18°35'N, 98°29'E and 20°04'N, 99°09'E respectively, may reflect a genuine distributional patchiness in this taxon, given that these mountains are among the best surveyed sites for forest birds in northern Thailand.

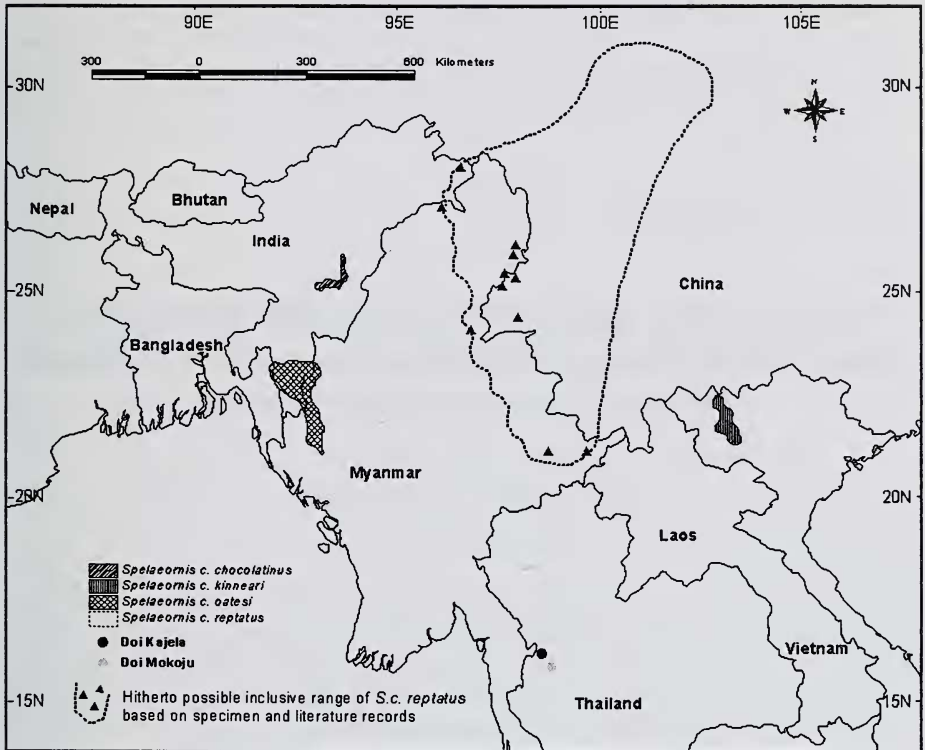


Figure 2. Ranges of the subspecies of Long-tailed Wren Babbler *Spelaornis chocolatinus*.

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## **Rediscovery of John Crampton W. Kershaw's birds from Macau, including his record of Small *Niltava Niltava macgrigoriae***

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John Crampton W. Kershaw (died August 1950 aged 79) considered himself an entomologist rather than an ornithologist and referred to himself as a retired zoologist in later years (Kershaw 1907, Vaughan & Jones 1913, Easton 1999 a,b), yet published an important list of the birds of Macau ("Macao") and adjacent parts of the Guangdong ("Quangtung" or "Kwangtung") coast east to Hong Kong (Kershaw 1904). Following Robert Swinhoe's pioneering visit in 1860 (Swinhoe 1861), Kershaw's paper was not the first to deal with this area but added to the list and included notes on the status and seasonality of most species. In this respect it has subsequently proved to be of much value in the ornithological progress of the area (Vaughan & Jones 1913, Mell 1922, Herklots 1953, Carey *et al.* 2001).

As is clear from the opening sentences of the paper, Kershaw's list of species is based mainly on his own collection of birds, which was made between October 1901 and June 1903, chiefly at Macau. Thus, he included in the duck accounts only those species "of which I have shot specimens myself" (Kershaw 1904: 235). He also "often shot Cuckoos" (Kershaw 1907: 139), more through interest in their 'entomological' stomach contents than the birds themselves. However, until recently, it was not known whether any part of his Macau bird collection was still in existence. New investigations at The Natural History Museum, Tring, have now brought some of Kershaw's South China birds to light.

### **Method**

All possible collections within Europe, especially in Britain, were checked for the name 'Kershaw' and collectors' names associated with him, by consulting several